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ABSTRACT

"The Ladies' Home Journal" and its founder Cyrus H. K. Curtis are often praised for establishing significant and lasting standards of reputable advertising in the United States. These standards include banning the profitable but offensive advertising of patent medicines, vouching for the integrity of advertising contained in the magazine, eliminating heavy black masses of typography from advertising, and encouraging large space display advertisements. A systematic examination of a sample of "Journal" issues published between 1886 and 1919 was conducted to determine whether the magazine deserved the credits often attributed to it and whether it faithfully adhered to the standards it supposedly set. The findings showed that, with only minor exceptions, the "Journal" did institute and abide by the standards it has been credited with using. It was not clear, however, whether Curtis established advertising reforms as a result of foresight, wisdom, and altruism, or as a result of being quick to recognize and fulfill the wishes of his readers. (Author/RL)

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Magazine Division

The Ladies' Home Journal:

Its Influence on Advertising 1886-1919

By

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The Ladies' Home Journal:
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Born of the technology which by the mid-nineteenth century permitted mass production of printed material which could be afforded by the growing middle class, mass-circulation magazines began in that period to exert their influence on American life. Godey's Lady's Book began publishing, for example, as early as 1830 and by the 1850s held claim to more than 150,000 subscribers. The Postal Act of 1879 set the scene for a proliferation of mass-circulation magazines which could thereafter begin reaching a national audience with relative ease.[1] Circulations soared in the aftermath.

Dependent to a great extent on advertising revenues for adequate financial support, the mass-circulation magazine as a genre is attributed in turn with revolutionizing the advertising industry while providing a medium for promoting consumer products in the national market.[2] Certainly among the leaders in this revolution was The Ladies' Home Journal, the first United States magazine to reportedly reach the one million subscriber mark.[3] Firmly established within a half dozen years following its initial appearance in 1883, the Journal, as the first and for many years most significant product of the publishing company headed by Cyrus Hermann Kotzschmar Curtis, reportedly took a strong initiative in establishing

standards and procedures which are credited with having a profound and lasting effect on advertising practices for years after their implementation.[4]

Under the direction of Curtis and, from 1889 to 1919, editor Edward W. Bok, both of whom had served as advertising managers for other publications prior to their careers with the Journal, the magazine grew rapidly in size and influence on both readers and advertisers. While Bok played his part, as may have John Adam Thayer as the Journal's typographer and advertising manager for many years, most of the credit for the successes and innovations in the area of advertising carried by the Journal is frequently given to Curtis. "Mr. Curtis has introduced or been a main figure in the development of methods that have been of the broadest significance in the evolution of modern advertising," according to Presbrey.[5] Indeed, Curtis has been credited with selling not just advertising space, but with selling the whole idea of national advertising.[6]

The Ladies' Home Journal, under the direction of Curtis and Bok, has often been credited as a leader in eliminating advertising which is offensive, both in appearance and content. Curtis and his publishing company have also been heralded for establishing business practices which have had a lasting impact on the advertising industry.

Upon close examination of much existing literature on the subject, however, many of the accolades bestowed upon Curtis and The Ladies' Home Journal appear to echo recounts offered by Bok, Curtis's Journal editor, publishing company vice-president, and later son-in-law. In addition to many editorials in the Journal, Bok authored his own biography, The Americanization of Edward Bok,[7] and a biography of Curtis, A Man from Maine,[8] both written in the 1920s. While Bok's integrity does not appear vulnerable to serious question, it is not hard to imagine that his memory might have been favorably bent in reflections about Curtis and the Journal. Despite his long-term relationship with Curtis, Bok reportedly knew little except the surface of his father-in-law--or, if he knew more, chose not to reveal it.[9] Yet it is easy to share James Playsted Wood's perception of A Man from Maine as "a hymn to Curtis."[10]

While Bok's contentions about Curtis and the Journal are often found in the writings of others, few accounts on the subject make any reference to the actual pages of the Journal as a basis for their claims. The present study was undertaken not only to compare existing reports on the Journal's role in relation to advertising with each other, but to compare them with the pages of the Journal during the years it was under Bok's editorship (1889 to 1919) as well. This involved,

in addition to reviewing and comparing existing literature about the Journal during this period, an examination of a systematic sample of Journal numbers consisting of every eleventh issue of the monthly publication over the years mentioned. Eight extra mid-month editions produced in 1910-1911 were excluded for sampling purposes. Journal numbers prior to 1889 were not available for examination but their exclusion might not be considered significant as most innovations in advertising which have been credited to Curtis or to the Journal reportedly occurred during the years following 1889.

The purpose of this study is to seek answers to the following questions.

1. Does The Ladies' Home Journal deserve the credits for setting advertising standards which are often attributed to it?

2. Did The Ladies' Home Journal faithfully adhere to some of the standards it supposedly set?

Any answers to these questions may be highly subjective and the results of research presented here are admittedly qualitative rather than quantitative.

In discussing the first thirty-six years of the Journal's history it is valuable to reflect for a moment on the environment from which it grew, as it was certainly a creature of its times. The Ladies' Home Journal no doubt owes much of its success to the era in which it was

born and to the preceding century and a half which had set the scene for the profitable mass circulation magazine.

As early as 1741, Benjamin Franklin and his Philadelphia newspaper rival, Andrew Bradford, had attempted publication of magazines in this country. While these two periodicals did not long survive (three numbers of Bradford's and six of Franklin's were apparently issued before they were discontinued), before the end of the eighteenth century they were to be followed by about 100 others.[11] By 1789, the Massachusetts Magazine, founded by Isaiah Thomas, began to direct its content at the growing literate middle class, a departure from the practice of previous magazines which presented material primarily aimed at the elite class of reader, and an indication of things to come.

A series of Postal Acts, beginning with two in the 1790s gave more and more favor to periodicals, allowing them to reach out to wider audiences. Yet, the average life of the eighteenth century American magazine was only fourteen months. There was very little advertising support for these magazines and high subscription costs restrained their growth.[12] While the number of U. S. magazines grew from only five in 1794 to forty by 1810, the aftermath of the War of 1812 precipitated a general rise in postal rates of as much as 50%, dealing magazines a costly blow.[13]

Termed the "Golden Age" of magazines by at least one writer,[14] the period from 1825 to 1850 witnessed large growth in magazines. By the mid-1830s magazines were reportedly a dominating force in American life.[15] Though circulations were still not overly impressive, magazines were normally read thoroughly and their impact was greater than their circulation figures might indicate. Larger circulations were to have to await the coming expansion of national markets and transportation systems, however. The wait did not seem to deter many publishers as one estimate claims that somewhere between four and five thousand magazines were started during this period, though many apparently were short-lived.[16]

The country was rapidly moving from its agrarian economy to an industrial one. In 1850 the annual value of the products of American factories exceeded that of agricultural products for the first time.[17] Steamboats, great canals, and railroads were greatly expanding transportation links, allowing wider and faster distribution of manufactured goods.

Distribution systems which had been built up to meet the necessities of the Civil War, later provided national distribution channels for the mass circulation magazines as well.[18] In 1879 a new Postal Act gave full second-class mailing priveleges to magazines and in 1897 rural free delivery service was initiated.

Cheaper paper and printing methods had also brought the price of magazines within the reach of the growing middle class before 1900. Literary magazines began to give way to the cheaper, more entertaining publications which were being established deliberately as business ventures, rather than as organs of expression.[19] The Ladies' Home Journal (1883), Cosmopolitan (1886), Munsey's (1889), and McClure's (1893) were typical of the new business venture, entertainment magazines during this period.

It was also during the latter part of the nineteenth century that advertising and magazines slowly joined hands. Prior to the Civil War era, newspapers had been the primary medium for advertising, with most magazines carrying little or no advertising.[20] During the 1880s and 1890s advertising had grown with great recklessness and a lack of direction, and often a lack of responsibility that had also characterized the expansion of trade and commerce of the day. There was little to check the claims of advertisers other than their own imagination and budgets.[21] As a result, both reputable manufacturers and magazires viewed advertising with caution. In the early 1870s Fletcher Harper reportedly refused an offer of eighteen thousand dollars a year for the last page of Harper's New Monthly Magazine for advertising for the Howe Sewing Machine. By the 1890s, however, Harper's

Magazine led all others in advertising volume.[22] Even by 1898 many legitimate manufacturers were still hiding their advertising plans or the advertising itself according to one report.[23]

This then was the scene when Cyrus H. K. Curtis began his publishing career. After a number of years working as an advertising solicitor for various publications in Boston, Curtis began the People's Ledger in 1872. In 1876 Curtis moved the People's Ledger to Philadelphia where he could get it printed for less.[24] Two years later Curtis sold the Ledger to take another advertising solicitor position with the Philadelphia Press.[25]

In 1879, with a $2,000.00 loan from his brother-in-law, Curtis founded The Tribune and Farmer, a 4-page weekly publication. He began to run a "woman and home" department in The Tribune and Farmer which he for the most part pasted up from clippings. His wife ridiculed it and in turn volunteered to edit the section, an offer which Curtis quickly accepted.[26] The new section under Louisa Knapp Curtis's editorship was so well received it quickly grew from a single column to a full page and later to a monthly supplement which Curtis gave away to The Tribune and Farmer subscribers.

This woman's supplement already had a circulation of 20,000 when Curtis decided to sell The Tribune and Farmer

and turn his woman's supplement into a separate paper. The first number of the new publication was issued in December 1883, it contained eight pages, and was printed on cheap paper. When the printer's composing room foreman asked Curtis what to set as title for the new paper, Curtis reportedly replied, "Call it anything you like. It's sort of a ladies' journal." The printer had set The Ladies' Journal as the title. However, between the words Ladies' and Journal he had inserted a home scene and had put the word "home" under it. When readers corresponded with the magazine staff they referred to the periodical as The Ladies' Home Journal, and the name stuck.[27]

Curtis promoted his new magazine heavily. He spent huge sums on advertising for the Journal, offered premiums for new subscriptions, and offered a "club" deal where four readers could each obtain a 50¢ a year subscription for 25¢ if the orders were submitted together. By the end of the first year, 90% of the subscriptions received were being received in clubs of four.[28]

Often doubling his circulation every six months, by the end of the Journal's sixth year Curtis had built the magazine's circulation to over 440,000. His wife had remained as editor throughout this period but by 1889 she apparently felt her daughter needed her more at home than her husband did at the Journal and therefore

relinquished her position. To take her place at the magazine Curtis hired Edward W. Bok. Uninhibited by modesty or tradition, Bok seemed to enjoy the publicity he received as the youngest and highest paid woman's magazine editor of his day.[29] Also, unlike the anonymity of most magazine editors at the time, Bok took great efforts in establishing the closest possible relationship between the editor and his readers. During his thirty-year tenure on the Journal Bok was responsible for many editorial innovations which, except for the part they played in building circulation for the Journal as an advertising medium, are beyond the scope of this paper.

The Ladies' Home Journal securely established its financial success on the base of advertising revenue. In 1888, a year before Bok joined the Journal, the magazine reportedly had two to three times as much advertising as other women's magazines.[30] As the Journal grew as an advertising medium, Curtis began to establish policies and set standards which were often to become lasting features of the advertising industry.[31]

One of the most widely cited Curtis actions was his elimination of patent-medicine advertising from the pages of the Journal at a time when this form of advertising was prevalent throughout the industry. With one minor exception to be mentioned in a minute,

all the evidence encountered in this study confirms that Curtis did take such action. However, there seems to be some question over his motives for doing so, the precise date his decision became effective, and how seriously the loss of this advertising hurt him financially.

In his autobiography, John Adam Thayer claims credit for convincing Curtis to ban patent medicine advertising shortly after being hired as typographer for the Journal in 1892.[32] Steinberg, however, reports that Curtis reached his decision to refuse future contracts for patent medicine and cosmetics advertising in September 1890.[33] Bok implies that it was through Curtis's own moral convictions that he instituted the ban,[34] but Steinberg speculates that Curtis came to his decision in response to a reader survey which indicated that 90% of Journal readers favored the elimination of this form of advertising.[35]

Steinberg points out that 1892 and 1893 are both variously cited as the year in which the ban on patent medicine advertising in the Journal began.[36] In the issues sampled for this study, no patent medicine advertisements were discovered in either of these two years, Nor were there any in later issues sampled with one possible exception. The August 1894 number contains a small advertisement for Burnett's Lavender Salts, described as "especially useful for headache, faintness, and

hysteria--for sale by druggists or mail."[37]

Bok claims that a "considerable part" of the Journal's advertising revenue came from patent medicine advertising at the time of Curtis's decision.[38] While examination of the first few numbers of the Journal sampled in this study did reveal some patent medicine advertising, this class of advertising did not appear to constitute a considerable part of the total. In the years following 1893 the total number of advertising lines run by the Journal did decline somewhat. However, due to raises in advertising rates, revenue from advertising continued to grow every year between 1892 and 1897.[39]

In addition to patent medicine advertising, the Curtis ban included advertising for cosmetics as well. Curtis "didn't believe in rouges and powders for women, and thus could not bring himself to advocate their purchase through the columns of his magazine," Bok reports.[40] Yet, readers reportedly found cosmetic ads as distasteful as the patent medicine ads and their views may have had a strong influence on Curtis's decision.[41]

In the issues of the Journal sampled only one ad for any cosmetic product was discovered prior to 1919. That was a small ad for La Blanche Face Powder in the November 1902 issue.[42] However, in 1919 a number of face-powder ads were found, including two full page examples in a single number.[43]

Years before banning patent medicine and cosmetic ads Curtis had resolved to carry only those advertisements of the most reliable nature, according to Bok.[44] As early as 1884, Curtis wrote that "every advertiser in this paper is believed to do a square, honest business. Great pains are taken to know if each one intends and is able to do the right thing and treat our readers honestly. Thousands of dollars worth of advertising is [sic] rejected from parties whose responsibility is in doubt."[45] Later Curtis went so far as to offer reimbursement to a reader for any reasonable claim which he or she may have against any advertiser if the loss was brought about by the influence of advertising appearing in his publication.[46]

Three years before the founding of The Ladies' Home Journal the Farm Journal had made a similar offer[47] and as early as the 1860s the Agriculturist apparently had begun to censor its advertising.[48] So the idea was not totally new. Yet, Curtis's adoption of a responsible advertising policy seems to have come many years before the idea had become widespread.

The Ladies' Home Journal is also often credited with instituting typographical reforms in advertising, particularly during the years Thayer worked for the magazine.[49] Even before Thayer's arrival Curtis had eliminated advertisements with heavy black type and gothic type, according to Steinberg.[50] The issues examined

in this study confirm this contention. Indeed, in all the numbers sampled, heavy black masses of typography were not found either in the editorial matter or in the advertisements.

Curtis also reportedly did much to encourage larger ads, occasionally offering to pay the difference between a small and large advertisement himself.[51] Changes in this direction, as noticed in the issues examined, were slow and occurred only over a long period. The early numbers sampled contained a great number of small three line ads much like classified notices. The number of such ads declined steadily over the years, yet it was not until around 1900 that the Journal contained more than a few ads per issue larger than one-quarter page.

The area where a move toward larger ads was most noticeable was the Journal's back cover. In December 1890 the Journal's back cover contained 14 different advertisements. The November 1891 issue contained many small ads on the back cover but they were all for the same advertiser (The Christian Herald). The first full page ad discovered on the Journal's back cover was on the October 1892 issue. Following 1892 the Journal reportedly adopted the policy of selling the back cover only as a single unit.[52]

The Ladies' Home Journal has also been credited with barring advertisement which resembles editorial

matter in appearance eighteen years before the practice became general law for U.S. periodicals. The announcement of the Journal's policy in this regard came in November 1894.[53] Violations of this policy are obviously difficult to detect at times. A full-page ad for the Republican National Committee which appeared two years before the ban could hardly be distinguished from editorial matter, and in fact did not even mention the Republican National Committee in the ad. A borderline violation of this policy was observed in the May 1908 number of the Journal, however. Page 45 of that issue contains a large, traditional ad, covering about two-thirds of the page, for Armour's Leaf Lard. Below the ad, filling the remainder of the page, is an article entitled "Facts About Frying" with a byline crediting a Mary Jane McClure as author. Among recipes for fritters and popovers the article advises the reader that "the only way to secure pure leaf lard is to buy a package of guaranteed leaf lard. Unless the name "Armour" is on the package, a housewife has no means of being certain that she is buying the real pure article."[54] Whether or not this constitutes a violation of the policy against advertisements which appear to be editorial is certainly a subjective decision.

Perhaps the most significant contribution to modern advertising made by the Curtis Publishing Company was that of the agency contract. Advertising agents of

the 1890s have been described as being "unfettered by ethics, willing devotees of the flexible commercial morality of the hotly competitive day . . . who assumed no responsibilities beyond that of making as much money as they could."[55] In an effort to abolish rate-cutting, commission cutbacks, and fierce agent competition, which often characterized the advertising industry of the day, the Curtis Publishing Company issued its first agency contract in May 1901. The contract bound Curtis to pay a 10% commission to the advertising agency for all advertising they placed, but it also obligated the agency to charge their clients the full published rate for all advertising space used. While Curtis was not always able to enforce the provisions of the contract, his attempts and limited success in doing so reportedly played a major role in transforming advertising agencies from mere space brokers into more full service organizations.[56]

Two aspects of Journal advertising which do not receive much mention in existing literature but which did strike this author as he examined the pages of the Journal are the slow adoption of color and the elimination of advertisements from the first dozen or so pages of the magazine. Curtis claimed that he could save 25% by printing the Journal in his own plant which at least until 1911, had only limited color printing capability.[57] This might explain why, despite the fact that three-color

halftones were in widespread use by 1902,[58] only a few experimental color ads and no color editorial material was apparent in the Journal before 1911.

Early editions of the Journal displayed many small ads in the outer edges of editorial matter, even on the first few pages. Starting in 1890, the Journal raised advertising line rates for advertising placed in front of the editorial page (generally around page 10-14) and by 1892 such ads were gone entirely. In 1896 the Journal began the practice of continuing editorial features on pages shared with advertising in the back part of the magazine.[59] The magazines sampled indicate that this practice was engaged in only occasionally after its first use but became more common in later years.

In conclusion, the pages of the Journal examined in this study provided little evidence with which to dispute existing claims about its advertising practices. The few cases where possible exceptions to stated standards were found were by no means serious violations of those standards.

There is ample evidence to support the claim that Curtis established standards of responsibility in advertising which were later to become widely accepted. While The Ladies' Home Journal may not have been the first in establishing some of the standards it is often credited

with, it was certainly a leader and a significant one at that.

The question which remains, however, is whether Curtis established advertising reforms as a result of great foresight, wisdom, and altruism, as Bok contends, or as a result of being quick to recognize and fulfill the wishes of his readers. The Ladies' Home Journal had always encouraged reader responses of various sorts, often offering cash prizes for essays on "What I Like Most about The Ladies' Home Journal" or something similar. As we have seen, Steinberg suspects it was readers' responses that encouraged Curtis to eliminate cosmetic and patent medicine advertising.

Whatever his reasons, Curtis did apparently lead the way to more-responsible advertising.

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